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Over to You, Senator

By Richard Starnes



A SPIRITED — if maundering and contradictory—defense of the Central Intelligence Agency's role in Viet Nam has been uttered by Sen. Thomas J. Dodd (D., Conn.).

Altho he prudently avoided using my name, Sen. Dodd's speech unmistakably was an attack upon me for reporting the truth about the CIA's headlong willfulness in Viet Nam. The speech was long-winded and tedious, which is par for the course, and it was also essentially untrue. It betrayed a man who either is disingenuous or whose memory has played him false.

He complained to the Senate that "baiting the CIA almost seems to have achieved the stature of a popular national pastime." He cited my dispatches from Saigon last October, and he alluded to two subsequent broadsides against the CIA leveled by "distinguished members of Congress." He neglected to include in his indictment, a well-reasoned attack on the CIA made recently by former President Harry Truman, who repeated and enlarged upon my well-founded charges that the huge espionage apparatus had strayed into operational and policy-making areas where it did not belong. Sen Dodd's motive in slighting Mr. Truman is unknown to me, and may well be nothing more than additional evidence of eclectic memory.

In his speech, the Senator and erstwhile FBI agent warned that these attacks upon the CIA are "highly dangerous," and added:

"Whether the critics realize it or not, these charges also constitute an attack on the wisdom and integrity of both President Eisenhower and President Kennedy. It is tantamount to accusing them of passively allowing an executive agency to function without control or supervision, and to make foreign policy — in other words to usurp the President's own authority. This is patently ridiculous. Neither President would have ever permitted such a thing."

Here regard for historical truth impels one to remind the Senator that he himself repeated strikingly similar charges, "patently ridiculous" or not, less than four years ago.

I quote now from a press release issued by the Senate Internal Security Sub-committee for use Sunday, Sept. 11, 1960:

"Cuba was handed to Castro and the communists by a combination of Americans in the same way that China was handed to the communists," Senators James O. Eastland (D., Miss.) and Thomas J. Dodd (D., Conn.) said today in releasing the testimony of two former United States Ambassadors."

The two envoys were Earl E. T. Smith, who was U. S. Ambassador to Havana when Castro rose to power, and Arthur Gardner, his immediate predecessor. Again the press release:

"The Senators drew particular attention to this statement of Ambassador Smith,

"We helped overthrow the Batista dictatorship which was pro-American, only to install the Castro dictatorship, which is pro-Russian."

"According to former Ambassador Smith, the agencies of the United States Government, which had a hand in bringing pressure to overthrow the Batista government were certain influential people, influential sources in the State Department, lower down echelons in the CIA . . ."

These charges, of course, were not ridiculous.

Ambassador Smith is a distinguished financier and public official. He leveled his charges against the CIA in sworn testimony before the Internal Security subcommittee, on Aug. 30, 1960, Sen. Dodd, among others, present. Ambassador Smith enlarged upon his charges in a book (previously quoted here at some length) entitled "The Fourth Floor," which was published by Random House two years ago. Both his testimony, which was accepted at face value and broadcast by Sen. Dodd, and his book made it plain that the CIA, indeed, had run contrary to American interests, had helped boost Castro into power, had made policy, or attempted to, and, in one instance, had been openly rebellious and insulting toward Ambassador Smith.

So much for Sen. Dodd's own excursion into what I am afraid he would now deride as dangerous CIA baiting.

In his speech two weeks ago, Sen. Dodd laid two charges against me. Both are false and dastardly, both are of a piece with the CIA's record for crude intimidation of reporters who undertake to expose its lunatic growth and hunger for power.

Charge: A dispatch of mine identified and thus destroyed the usefulness of one John Richardson, the CIA's then "station chief" in Saigon. Truth: Mr. Richardson's identity and role in Saigon were secrets from no one — except American newspaper readers. He was widely known as the CIA's chief resident spook in Saigon. It is inconceivable that in a few days of digging, I could discover information not long known to Ho Chi Minh's espionage network.

Charge: My dispatches violated a gentleman's agreement to protect the identity of CIA agents.

Truth: I am party to no agreement to hide facts from American taxpayers and parents when I am sure the enemy knows them.

Charge: Striking at the CIA is like hitting a man "who has his hands tied behind his back . . . the agency cannot confirm or deny published reports, true or false, favorable or unfavorable. It cannot alibi. It cannot explain. It cannot answer . . ."

Truth: Baloney. Ask any reporter who has hung one on the CIA's solid Spode chin. Few editors with guts enough to hire honest reporters have not had plaintive and/or outraged phone calls from CIA Director John McCone and his predecessors. And, indeed, Sen. Dodd's own apologia disproves him. The voice is Sen. Dodd's, but I've got a powerful hunch the words are Mr. McCone's.